

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 20

Paul Revere and Dr. Joseph Warren

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. Paul Revere's Midnight Ride fame did not occur in a vacuum, nor was it a spur of the moment act driven out of an immediate emergency. Rather, Revere's ride was part of an intricate intelligence system put in place by the Boston Sons of Liberty, which was an outgrowth of many personal connections in the town that had been established over the previous decade plus. While Revere was certainly a central player in his town branch, and a leader amongst those in his 'middling sort,' Revere was not the ultimate master mind or leading figure in his hometown. Samuel Adams and John Hancock, of course, were vital on this front, but perhaps the most significant leader for the Bostonians was Dr. Joseph Warren. Warren is a very well-known figure around Boston today, but is often a somewhat missing figure from historical narratives around the Revolution at large, in part because of his death very early in the conflict. Prior to his death, however, Joseph Warren and Paul Revere became close friends and colleagues of sorts, and Warren, though six years younger, shaped Revere's life and role in the Revolution. In addition to their strong connection, Warren's death, early in his life, presents us with counterfactuals not just for the trajectory of America and Warren's career, but certainly Paul Revere's career as well.

Though they ultimately developed a bond of friendship, Revere and Warren came from different segments of Boston society. Revere's upbringing differed from that of his friend, in life opportunities, finances, and education. Though Warren's father, a farmer from Roxbury, died when he was young, Warren was presented with educational opportunities that Revere was not. He was able to attend Roxbury Latin as a young man and then matriculated to Harvard College, ultimately studying medicine. The educational background, fused with his specialized and respected profession as a doctor, immediately placed Warren into the camp of potential leadership within the colony, and certainly elevated him in social status to the upper echelons of respectability in the Boston area.

Revere on the other hand was slated to be his father's silversmith apprentice from a young age. Yes, Paul did attend North Writing School in the North End, but there were no illusions that Paul would move on to Harvard or higher education. He was slated to learn the silversmith trade from his father starting at the age of 13, and dutifully did so through the course of his father's life. Revere officially took over his late father's shop when he turned 21.

Revere lived in Boston for almost his entire life, so was established in the North End and in town when he took over the shop. Warren was not, but ultimately moved into town after Harvard and was instrumental in the 1764 inoculation campaign for the town during the outbreak of that year.

Boston was small, around 15,000 people at the time of the Revolution, so it is possible the two men's paths would have crossed naturally over time. It was their shared connection to freemasonry, however, that seems to have brought them together.

Freemasonry provided Revere with his most frequent business contracts, lifelong political and social ties- but the most obvious societal benefits from his membership came through his relationship with Warren. The two likely would not have developed a relationship, or at least one that so clearly cut across class boundaries- without the fraternal organization. While Warren was not a regular attendee for the St. Andrew's Lodge of Freemasons, he was there long enough and at critical times for Revere to make the connection. The two first crossed paths in the organization in 1761, and then further deepened those ties in the late 1760s when Warren returned to the Lodge with more regularity, just as tensions were really escalating between the British authorities and Bostonians. In 1769, the two men strengthened their bond through their role in the founding of the first Grand Lodge of Ancient Masons in Massachusetts.

As their Freemason connects grew, so too did their participation in the nascent Sons of Liberty. Always somewhat of a nebulous organization- by necessity, since their actions continued to border towards treason, the hierarchical structure more clearly delineated the differences between Revere and Warren than Freemasonry did.

In the period from 1765 to 1775, Warren emerged at the center of leadership- for the Boston Tea Party, for orations keeping the memory of the Boston Massacre alive, and for general organizing as Bostonians slowly worked their way towards Revolution. He became an influential leader, one highly respected by the Bostonian revolutionaries.

As Revere became more involved with the Sons of Liberty, his lack of secondary education and profession precluded him from being in the same ranks as Warren. He was of course an influential member- from his Massacre engraving in 1770, his illuminations of the event at the Revere House itself on the Massacre's first anniversary, and his emergence as a trusted courier for the committee of correspondence. Revere's legacy lives on in a strong way today, but he was not at the core of decisions being made or of influencing the actions of members like Warren.

Revere and Warren did work in tandem in the lead up to his Midnight Ride, with Revere functioning as an essential cog in Warren's growing intelligence network within the town. Revere recounted the system in some detail later in life in his famous letter to Jeremy Belknap at the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society- Revere reflected that in the fall of 1774 into the subsequent winter, he was "one of upwards of thirty, chiefly mechanics, who formed ourselves in to a Committee for the purpose of watching the Movements of the British Soldiers, and gaining every intelligence of the movements of the Tories." Revere noted that the meetings were at the Green Dragon Tavern, and that one of the few principles that received the information was Doctor Joseph Warren.

For the night itself on April 18, Revere noted that around 10 PM "Dr. Warren Sent in great haste for me, and begged that I would immediately Set off for Lexington, where Misters Hancock &

Adams were, and acquaint them of the Movement, and that it was thought they were the objects.” He continued that “When I got to Dr. Warren's house, I found he had sent an express by land to Lexington - a Mr. Wm. Dawes” and that “The Sunday before, by desire of Dr. Warren, I had been to Lexington, to Mess. Hancock and Adams, who were at the Rev. Mr. Clark's.” and then, from there, subsequently devised the lantern system for alert on the night of his ride. The specific references to Warren and Revere’s heeding of Warren’s call for him to visit his house convey a close connection between the men, but one that still indicates a deference on Revere’s part towards his social better.

Following the brunt of his action on the night of April 18th into the 19th, we lose track of Revere after he moved John Hancock’s trunk moments before the shots first rang out at Lexington Green. On the other hand, we know Warren rode out and took a leadership charge amongst the forming militia groups as the British soldiers retreated to Boston. The next day, we know Revere reported back to Warren on April 20 and the Committee of Safety, which in a sense fully closed off his mission.

Their connections were not to last much longer, however, as Warren became a martyr for the cause at the Battle of Bunker Hill, where he died on June 17, 1775 at the young age of 34 years old. Warren not only died in the line of battle, but he had refused elevated ranks that he was offered, and fought hand in hand with his fellow citizens and men below his social rank.

Abigail Adams reflected to her husband John Adams- both of whom were also close friends with Warren- saying “our dear Friend Dr. Warren is no more but fell gloriously fighting for his Country... great is our Loss. He has distinguished himself in every engagement, by his courage and fortitude, by animating the Soldiers & leading them on by his own example.”

The following year, in perhaps one of the first cases of forensic science in America, Revere identified his friend’s body through dental work that he had performed on Warren. Subsequently, Revere paid his friend one of the greatest tributes he could, naming his child born in 1777 Joseph Warren Revere. In doing so, Joseph Warren’s name lived on as the Revere name was elevated over the 19th century, and Joseph Warren Revere would oversee the expansion of Revere Copper through the Civil War.

One of the biggest Revere related counterfactuals, for me at least, is what his career might have looked like if Warren did not die so early in the war. True, Paul Revere was not at Bunker Hill himself- he was seemingly holding out for a higher posting in the Massachusetts or even continental army military structure. Even still, he had clearly hitched his political fortunes to Warren, and he had been a nearly indispensable deputy for Warren’s informational and intelligence campaign from the Tea Party through the Midnight Ride. There has been great speculation amongst Warren’s contemporaries and historians as to what his elevated role in the new United States may have been if he had survived. While I do wonder that, I also wonder what roles Revere may have secured if Warren continued to rely on him as a trusted deputy.

That will do it for today's episode. Please keep in touch with us on all of our social media platforms and email, and stay tuned for our upcoming programming, including our final lecture for the Lowell Lecture Series this coming Tuesday, September 29 at 6:30 PM. The lecture will be streamed live on our YouTube and Facebook channels and will be a panel discussion on the state of climate change and historic sites in Boston, featuring Zoe Davis, Boston's Climate Resilience Project Coordinator, Amy Longsworth- the Director of Boston's Green Ribbon Commission, and our own Executive Director, Nina Zanneiri. We hope you will tune in for that one and we will see you virtually then! Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.